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uniqlo: expansion INto canada[[1]](#endnote-1)

Won-Yong Oh, Seok-Woo Kwon, and Brooke Miskiman wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In September 2016, Japanese fashion retailer Uniqlo, a subsidiary of Fast Retailing Co. Ltd. (Fast Retailing), opened its first store in Canada. The opening of the first Uniqlo Canada location in the Eaton Centre in Toronto marked a notable strategy.[[2]](#endnote-2) The fashion retailer was taking a risk in the Canadian market, a market that had recently rejected foreign brands such as Target and Aéropostale. Fast Retailing’s chief executive officer (CEO), Tadashi Yanai, was focused on international expansion and the Canadian market presented a significant opportunity.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Uniqlo’s foray into the Canadian market was well researched, and the company approached Canadian customers differently than it had approached customers when entering the U.S. and European markets.[[4]](#endnote-4) The Eaton Centre location had a larger selection of plaid and flannel shirts, for example, and the store was stocked with a diverse array of sizes in an effort to appeal to Canada’s multicultural population. Uniqlo, known for its “cheap, chic, and made for all” fashion designs, had a goal of becoming the leader in the casual fashion market.[[5]](#endnote-5) Merely one month after opening its first Canadian store, Uniqlo opened its second Canadian location in Toronto in October 2016.[[6]](#endnote-6) In March 2017, with the two-store entry plan for the Canadian market, CEO Yanai was faced with the decision of whether and how to continue to pursue expansion in the Canadian market. How could Uniqlo increase its brand awareness and be successful in the Canadian fashion market?

**the canadian retail industry**

The Canadian retail industry stood as both a challenge and an opportunity for Uniqlo. The company was aware of the outcomes of other brands’ previous entries into the Canadian market. For example, just two years after retail behemoth Target Corporation (Target) had arrived in Canada, it announced it was closing all of its 133 Canadian locations in 2015.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Target, a U.S. retailer, faced much criticism after its entrance into and subsequent exit from the Canadian market. Among these criticisms was that it had an overly ambitious and aggressive expansion plan, a lack of understanding of the Canadian customer, and a mismatch in the product mix and features between the Canadian and U.S. stores. Target had proven to be a lesson for other global retailers attempting to enter the Canadian market. For example, Saks Fifth Avenue and Nordstrom, Inc. had since opened Canadian locations with a slow and steady approach to expansion and growth.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Uniqlo noted that one of its main challenges in penetrating the Canadian market was a lack of brand awareness; originating in Japan, Uniqlo did not have the same brand recognition its international rivals had had prior to entering the Canadian market.[[9]](#endnote-9) Thus, the company planned to take a cautious approach to entering the Canadian market.[[10]](#endnote-10) Significant emphasis was placed on market research and the importance of gaining a thorough understanding of the Canadian customer—likely a reasonable approach, given the cultural differences between Japan and Canada (see Exhibit 1).

According to the company’s annual report, “the Uniqlo brand is still comparatively new and not yet widely recognized.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Uniqlo Canada’s chief operating officer (COO), Yasuhiro Hayashi, stated that he was hopeful Uniqlo would appeal to Canadians despite its lack of recognition. Although he said “our study shows that we are not known in the market,” the company was nonetheless committed to understanding Canadian consumer sentiment, such as the immense price sensitivities Canadians faced.[[12]](#endnote-12) Target’s recent failure in the Canadian market in 2015 served as a lesson for Uniqlo.

**RIVALRY**

In Canada, Uniqlo did not possess the same brand recognition that its competitors had possessed prior to entering the Canadian retail market.[[13]](#endnote-13) The competitive landscape of the Canadian retail market was vastly different from that of Uniqlo’s home market and nearby Asian markets.

**Global Competitors**

In the Canadian market, Uniqlo had diverse competition. Its global competitors Zara, Hennes & Mauritz (H&M), and Forever 21 were mainstay fashion brands that appeared in Canadian malls. However, the Gap and Old Navy also presented themselves as rivals for Uniqlo. Spanish retailer Zara and Swedish retailer H&M were mainstay brands and leaders in the fast fashion industry (see Exhibit 2).

Upon entering Zara stores, customers faced trendy and fashion-forward designs. The stores often featured a limited amount of available merchandise, using the principle of scarcity to its advantage. Customers often made on-the-spot purchasing decisions, as the combination of low prices and uncertainty about how long trend items would be available drove consumer spending. Inditex SA, Zara’s parent company, was the world’s largest fashion retailer by sales.[[14]](#endnote-14) Of strategic importance for Zara was an efficient and integrated supply chain, which enabled shorter turnaround periods. H&M followed a similar strategy as Zara; however, its affordable fashion staples saw longer turnaround periods than those of Zara. American fashion retailer Forever 21 opened its first store in Canada in 2007, and since its foray into the Canadian market, its branded stores and trendy fashion designs had occupied Canadian malls.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The Gap and Old Navy were notable rivals for Uniqlo in the Canadian retail industry. Uniqlo’s affordable and casual fashion basics had to compete with those of the Gap and Old Navy. In a dynamic retail industry, the Gap and Old Navy had failed to adapt to the changing fast fashion landscape, and as of 2016, both brands had seen declining sales.[[16]](#endnote-16) Both brands were plagued by slower lead times than those of their competitors and were losing market share as a result.

**Local Competitors**

Specific to the Canadian market, Reitmans Ltd. (Reitmans) and Le Château Inc. (Le Château), two of Canada’s oldest fashion retailers, were struggling to keep up with the dynamic and ever-changing industry trend.[[17]](#endnote-17) In 2016, Reitmans closed 104 stores; in 2017, the brand said it planned to close 40 more stores, and Le Château announced that it would close 18 stores.[[18]](#endnote-18) Reitmans and Le Château were left to compete against the dominant international fast fashion brands such as Uniqlo, H&M, and Zara. In terms of sales, Uniqlo ranked third in the global market, behind Inditex SA (Zara) and H&M (see Exhibit 2).[[19]](#endnote-19) The company had a goal of becoming the largest apparel retailer in the world and was aware of the position of its competitors within the industry.

**the fast fashion model**

**Traditional Retail Model Versus Fast Fashion Model**

The fast fashion business stood in stark contrast to the traditional retail model; the fast fashion business model relied heavily on the integration of the supply chain.[[20]](#endnote-20) The goal of the industry was to quickly capture new fashion trends and get these trends to market in the quickest and cheapest manner possible.[[21]](#endnote-21) The fast fashion business model revolutionized the traditional retail industry, which in contrast was driven by seasons and a constant stock of similar merchandise.

Fast fashion was a business model offering stylish clothes at affordable prices. The business model required highly responsive supply chain management that could support fast product assortment. From a management perspective, this business model realized “lean retailing” as a result of items produced with short lead times. From a cultural perspective, fast fashion thought of fashion items as disposable goods; thus, it was frequently criticized for its perceived social irresponsibility.[[22]](#endnote-22)

The fast fashion business model had several hallmark features in comparison to the traditional retail model: “(1) quick response; (2) frequent assortment changes; and (3) fashionable designs at affordable prices.”[[23]](#endnote-23) An efficient supply chain facilitated all of the above hallmark features; vertical integration and getting products to the consumer as quickly as possible were essential to the business model.

**SPA Model: Exclusivity**

In the retail industry, the SPA (specialty store retailer of private label apparel) brand model was of notable importance. Fast fashion retailers such as Zara, H&M, Uniqlo, and the Gap used the SPA model, which was based on exclusivity in the production and sale of fashion items.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Fashion items were sold only at specifically branded stores. In other words, customers could not purchase a Zara blouse at a Nordstrom or Hudson’s Bay store. In the case of Uniqlo, the SPA brand model was a pillar of its business model; Uniqlo-branded tops were available only at Uniqlo-branded stores across the world, which further emphasized the element of exclusivity that was omnipresent in the fast fashion industry.[[25]](#endnote-25)

**uniqlo in canada**

Larry Meyer, CEO of Uniqlo USA and Canada, stated, “Whenever you go into a new country, you want to make sure everything’s right. You want to understand what works and what the customer wants.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

As of 2016, the company had forecasted an estimated 960 international stores, and as of 2017, the company was active in 19 different countries.[[27]](#endnote-27) The Canadian market represented a significant opportunity for Uniqlo, whose affordable basics and fashion staples were a draw for Canada’s multicultural population and diverse climate. COO Hayashi stated that Canada’s “cultural and climatic diversity represents the perfect platform for Uniqlo.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

As of March 2017, Canadian clothing and clothing accessory stores saw CA$2,722[[29]](#endnote-29) million in sales.[[30]](#endnote-30) A report by PwC Canada had found that the Canadian market relied heavily on engagement and offering.[[31]](#endnote-31) Canadian customers wanted a sense of community and to be engaged with the brand, and was especially prevalent in the fast fashion industry, as the merchandise was constantly changing. Customers also valued a tailored product offering. For example, in the retail industry, customers valued individual attention from retailers.[[32]](#endnote-32) PwC also found that price was a dominant factor in the decision-making process when it came to most Canadian consumers’ purchasing habits.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Given Uniqlo’s goal of taking over the casual fashion market, Canada seemed like a logical expansion step (see Exhibit 3). The brand was optimistic about the Canadian retail industry, and was committed to organizing around the average Canadian consumer.

**EXPAnsion in NOrth America**

Expansion into the North American markets provided a significant opportunity for growth. The North American markets included both the United States and Canada. In 2005, Uniqlo entered the U.S. market,[[34]](#endnote-34) and as of 2017 there were 47 U.S. Uniqlo stores; however, the brand was struggling to expand beyond large urban areas.[[35]](#endnote-35)

**Expansion in the Canadian Market**

Uniqlo noted that global markets would be key drivers of future growth for the company. Consequently, the company continued to pursue international expansion; “to extend its global presence and improve brand visibility worldwide,” the company continued to expand in areas such as Belgium and Canada.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Specifically, Meyer said, “Entering the Canadian market is a milestone for the company and a significant step in our growth strategy.”[[37]](#endnote-37) The company believed that the two Uniqlo Canada locations opened in September 2016 and October 2016 in Toronto would be “a great success.”[[38]](#endnote-38) The brand’s entrance into the Canadian market received an enthusiastic welcome, which further solidified Uniqlo’s hopes of becoming a well-known brand across North America. Uniqlo recognized the challenges associated with building brand awareness in a market as large and diverse as North America,[[39]](#endnote-39) but it was committed to addressing and overcoming those challenges.

Uniqlo tried to understand Canadian customers. As noted by COO Hayashi, “We found that Canadians are very confident, especially Torontonians are very confident in who they are, how they dress, the uniqueness.”[[40]](#endnote-40) However, Uniqlo did not target specific customer segments. Hayashi noted, “We don’t have a specific target customer. That’s our uniqueness. We say we are made for all.”[[41]](#endnote-41)

Instead, Uniqlo Canada emphasized affordability. Hayashi said, “If our clothes are not affordable to the people—the regular real people, not the fashionistas, not just the celebrities, not just the rich, but for all—then I think it defeats our philosophy and what we stand for.”[[42]](#endnote-42) He added, “We take price very seriously. We are sure we won’t disappoint Canadian customers.”[[43]](#endnote-43)

**Learning from U.S. Expansion**

Eleven years prior to opening its first Canadian Uniqlo location, Uniqlo opened its first U.S. location. Fast Retailing, which pursued an ambitious and aggressive international expansion plan in the U.S. market, had faced several challenges.[[44]](#endnote-44) The Uniqlo brand’s U.S. stores saw continued losses, and CEO Yanai stated that these losses were due to a combination of both rapid expansion and a lack of brand awareness.[[45]](#endnote-45) The company’s shortcomings in the U.S. market provided concrete lessons for international expansion in the Canadian market.

In the United States, the brand struggled to connect with consumers beyond large metropolitan areas, and a lack of brand awareness was a contributing factor to the limited success of the U.S. stores.[[46]](#endnote-46) Uniqlo was aware of its shortcomings in expanding in the U.S. market and sought to improve upon them when entering the Canadian retail market.

When the retailer decided to open its first Canadian location, COO Hayashi went to Toronto, where the new Uniqlo Canada store would open.[[47]](#endnote-47) Hayashi wanted to gain a thorough understanding of the average Canadian consumer, as he believed that such an understanding was foundational to tailoring the product offering and attracting customers.

Another shortcoming of Uniqlo’s previous expansion in the U.S. market had been its aggressive expansion strategy.[[48]](#endnote-48) Fast Retailing CEO Yanai had set ambitious goals for international expansion, specifically in regard to the U.S. market, given that it was the world’s biggest clothing market. The goal proved to be unreachable in the near term, given the sustained losses that occurred at the U.S. Uniqlo stores.[[49]](#endnote-49) Consequently, the company decided to take a slow and cautious approach to expansion in the Canadian market.[[50]](#endnote-50)

**What next?**

Global expansion represented a significant opportunity for Uniqlo. In the Canadian market, Uniqlo planned to differentiate itself from its competitors by focusing on fashion items made from high-quality materials and featuring universality in both design and comfort.

As of March 2017, there were only two Uniqlo Canada stores, both located in Toronto. However, a mere six months after entering the Canadian market, Uniqlo announced its plans for a new store in British Columbia.[[51]](#endnote-51) Could Uniqlo expand and thrive in the cutthroat Canadian retail market? Would Canadians see a surge of new Uniqlo brand stores pop up throughout Canada? How could Uniqlo increase its brand awareness and have staying power in the Canadian fashion market?

**Exhibit 1: Hofstede's cultural dimensions—japan versus canada**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Japan | Canada |
| Power distance | 54 | 39 |
| Individualism | 46 | 80 |
| Masculinity | 95 | 52 |
| Uncertainty avoidance | 92 | 48 |
| Long-term orientation | 88 | 36 |
| Indulgence | 42 | 68 |

Source: Created by the authors based on Hofstede Insights, *Compare Countries,* accessed December 7, 2017<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>.

**Exhibit 2: global apparel manufacturers and retailers INDustry Rankings, 2016, by Sales (in US$ BIllions)**

Source: Created by the authors based on Fast Retailing, *Industry Ranking*, last modified December 9, 2016, accessed December 7, 2017, www.fastretailing.com/eng/ir/direction/position.html.

**EXHIBIT 3: uniqlo stores by country, May 2016 to February 2017**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **May 31, 2016** | **August 31, 2016** | **November 30, 2016** | **February 28, 2017** |
| **Japan** | **846** | **837** | **841** | **832** |
| Own stores | 807 | 798 | 800 | 791 |
| Large-scale standard | 206 | 205 | 207 | 206 |
| Franchise | 601 | 593 | 593 | 585 |
| **Asia Pacific** |  |  |  |  |
| China | 449 | 472 | 497 | 514 |
| Hong Kong | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 |
| Taiwan | 63 | 63 | 63 | 64 |
| Korea | 171 | 173 | 178 | 178 |
| Singapore | 24 | 24 | 25 | 25 |
| Malaysia | 34 | 35 | 35 | 37 |
| Thailand | 32 | 32 | 34 | 34 |
| Philippines | 30 | 32 | 34 | 35 |
| Indonesia | 9 | 9 | 10 | 10 |
| Australia | 11 | 12 | 12 | 12 |
| **Europe** |  |  |  |  |
| UK | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| France | 10 | 10 | 15 | 15 |
| Russia | 11 | 11 | 14 | 14 |
| Germany | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Belgium | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| **North America** |  |  |  |  |
| USA | 44 | 45 | 49 | 48 |
| Canada | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| **Total (International)** | **928** | **958** | **1,009** | **1,029** |

Source: Created by the authors based on Fast Retailing, *Group Outlets*, accessed December 6, 2017, www.fastretailing.com/eng/about/business/shoplist.html.

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